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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT
MONDAY, MARCH 30, 2009

In Today's Papers

AKP Maintains Comfortable Overall Lead in March 29 Local Elections
Media outlets report Turkey's ruling party AKP won the nationwide municipal elections held on Sunday, but public support for the party fell to its lowest level since the party was established. The distribution of votes among the political parties in Sunday's vote was as follows: AKP 39.1 percent, CHP 23.1, MHP 16.2, DTP 5.3, and the Felicity Party (SP) 5.3. Mainstream Milliyet comments "For the first time since 2002, Prime Minister Erdogan's AKP won less votes than in previous elections. Papers underline that support for the AKP declined by three percent in comparison to the 2004 municipality elections, and by eight percent in comparison to the 2007 general elections.

The AKP kept its mayoral seats in the capital Ankara and the country's largest city Istanbul, where the competition with the main opposition CHP candidates ran tight. The ruling party, however, lost key cities that Prime Minister Erdogan had campaigned hard to take, including Izmir, Diyarbakir and Adana. The biggest surprise came from the Mediterranean province of Antalya where the AKP mayor, Menderes Turel, lost to CHP candidate and former rector of the city's university, Mustafa Akaydin. In Ankara, the CHP's Murat Karayalcin and MHP's Mansur Yavas increased their votes against three-time winner Melih Gokcek from the AKP. Mainstream Hurriyet says the CHP Istanbul mayoral candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who earned a good reputation through his fight against corruption in politics, boosted the center left and partly center right votes.

Papers also report CHP officials claimed fraud in the counting of the votes in Ankara and Istanbul. While the counting of the votes continued late Sunday night, the computer system of the High Election Board (YSK) collapsed around when Kilicdaroglu told the press he was slightly ahead of Topbas. CHP said it had "serious concerns" over the reliability of the election results in Istanbul and Ankara.

Editorial opinion on election results:

Mehmet Yilmaz wrote in mainstream Hurriyet: "There are significant lessons to take from the voters' choices among the three major political parties. The ruling AKP cannot continue under a fight-with-everybody approach and it should return to its reformist approach. The CHP can move forward only under genuine leadership and vision. And the MHP is also in need of new leadership. Given the increased level of voter support as well as the overall conservative nature of Turkish society, the MHP has emerged as the political alternative to the AKP."

Sedat Ergin wrote in mainstream Milliyet: "The ruling AKP is the winner, but this is somehow a wounded victory. There is no political instability as a result of this election, but the main opposition has now gained more political morale compared to previous local election performance."

Bulent Korucu wrote in Islamist oriented Zaman: "There is a certain degree of weakness in the AKP's victory. It stems from the wrong candidates as well as party organization's laziness by focusing only PM Erdogan's personal leadership and charisma."

Yasin Aktay wrote in Islamist oriented Yeni Safak: "The AKP has continuously increased its voter support every time during local and general elections, except this one. There are some serious losses for the AKP in certain districts. All of this will open the door for self criticism, which is a good thing."

March 29 Polls Analyses in the Press

Papers observe that the March 29 elections changed the political map

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of Turkey significantly; the CHP dominated the northwestern and western provinces whereas the AKP lost ground against the pro-Kurdish DTP in the eastern and southeastern provinces but maintained its strongholds in central Turkey. Leftist-nationalist Cumhuriyet ties the decline in the support for the AKP to the economic crisis and the corruption claims in the government and the municipalities held by the ruling party. The pro-government, Islamist-oriented Yeni Safak stresses the AKP renewed a "vote of confidence" in the elections. Islamist-oriented Zaman says the AKP managed to preserve its popularity despite the economic crisis, but received a warning from voters to be more careful in the nomination of candidates. Business daily Referans sees the election results as a reaction to Prime Minister Erdogan who has repeatedly said before the polls that the global economic crisis "by-passed" Turkey. Mainstream Sabah strikes a similar tone, saying the impact of the economic crisis reduced support for the AKP, especially in the industrialized western provinces hit by the crisis. Zaman says the CHP has increased support when it dropped the debates about the nature of the regime while the MHP received approval from its voters as well as a message to continue its "democratic stance." The paper sees the increase in support for the Islamist SP as its voters' approval of the election of Numan Kurtulmus as party leader. The SP has almost tripled its votes in a short period of only one-and-a-half years, a shift seen due to the change of leadership from veteran Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, who was the symbol of the Milli Gorus (National View) to Numan Kurtulmus, a new face appreciated by young conservatives. Leftist Taraf sees the rise in the support for SP as the Islamist voters' reaction to the failure of Erdogan's AKP government in ending headscarf restrictions. Papers report SP leader Kurtulmus said the decrease in the support for the AKP would trigger early general elections.

Erdogan: Election Results Taught Us a Lesson, We'll Act Accordingly
In his first statement about the results Sunday night, Prime Minister Erdogan acknowledged "dissatisfaction" in his party's failure to take the municipalities in cities such as Diyarbakir and Antalya. Erdogan said the public taught his party a lesson and they would act in line with this. The PM added that three reasons -- the global financial crisis, opposition against the ruling party in the media, and peoples' lack of appreciation for the AKP achievements -- were responsible in the decline in the AKP votes. "We went below our targets, nevertheless, our votes are still more than the sum of CHP and MHP," said Erdogan.

Cumhuriyet comments Prime Minister Erdogan set an ambitious target of winning the main municipalities such as Diyarbakir, Van and Tunceli in the mainly Kurdish east and southeast Turkey, and he mobilized state resources to win the support of voters, but the DTP candidates won landslide victories in these three provinces. Leftist Taraf emphasizes the state-run TRT television's Kurdish language broadcasts and the distribution of food and household goods to the poor families have not been sufficient to make people forget the "nationalistic messages" issued by the PM in the region before the elections, and the failure to end the fighting in the southeast.

Mainstream Sabah says the election results show the Kurdish issue cannot be resolved without the involvement of the DTP. Mainstream Milliyet says the election results revealed significant increase in support of Kurdish nationalism in the mainly Kurdish areas.

Mainstream papers expect Erdogan to make changes in the government, including cabinet reshuffle. A column in liberal Radikal says the results will force Erdogan to pursue more realistic policies by showing that he does not have the unconditional support of voters. Many people in Turkey were discomforted by the hard-line messages issued by Erdogan over the recent months; the results, however, will make the PM to step back, says Radikal.

Ambassador Jeffrey: The Obama Visit is An Indication of Turkey's Success

Sabah daily carried an interview with Ambassador James Jeffrey in

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two parts in the Saturday and Sunday editions. Ambassador Jeffrey's remarks as highlighted in the report are as follows:

"The U.S. is Turkey's natural partner and friend, and the visit of President Obama is an indication of Turkey's success."

"My visits to Sakarya Monument as well as to Maltepe Mosque just after assuming my role as Ambassador were meant to underline the importance of Turkey's founder Ataturk and to pay respect to the religious values of the predominantly Muslim Turkish society."

"There is no fundamental change in America's views of Turkey. The difference is in the tone; Secretary Clinton mentioned secularism but also emphasized the Muslim identity of Turkish society. We don't say 'moderate Islam' any more. People are moderate or radical, not states."

"There are vast areas for bilateral cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey. The significance of Turkey's importance is seen in its membership to NATO, the G-20 and other international institutions."

"Turkey's EU accession is in the interest of the US. Turkey is part of Europe both economically and commercially. And the United States will continue to support Turkey's EU accession."

"The PKK is a source of violence, terror and instability in the region. We have to deal with this problem. If military, political and legal measures fail to bring results, we will evaluate the situation."

TV News (CNN Turk)

Domestic

- Seven people are killed and 99 others are injured in quarrels between party supporters across Turkey that flared up during Sunday's voting in municipality elections.
- The funeral of Muhsin Yazicioglu, the BBP leader who died in a helicopter crash last week, will be held on Tuesday.
- The cost of the five economic stimulus packages announced by the AKP government since October is estimated as 36.4 billion lira.
- Turkey is the 20th largest importer of foreign goods in the world.

World

- Reports that Turkey might block Rasmussen's bid for the post of NATO secretary general by using its veto power raise the need to change the system of appointing top NATO officials.
- Israel's cabinet decides to withhold Hamas prisoners' leisure and educational privileges until the Islamist group frees the captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in the Gaza Strip.
- Defense Secretary Robert Gates says the US has no plans to shoot down a missile that North Korea has said it will fire to launch a communications satellite.
- US Vice President Joe Biden says Washington is not planning to lift its embargo on Cuba.

JEFFREY